

# THE IMPACT OF NATIVIST EXCLUSION ON THE MIGRANT LABOURERS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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South African society has been beset by an endemic problem of xenophobia since its liberation from apartheid in 1994. During apartheid citizens were over-sensitized about their identities through particularistic political prescription of race and ethnic identities. Black South African were oxymoronically referred to as ‘foreign natives’, as they were technically from the Bantustans and not bona fide citizens of the country. When racial segregation was dismantled, only those who could demonstrate a family connection with the colonial/apartheid formation of South African could claim citizenship at liberation. The rest and the deluge of immigrants that followed were regarded as opportunistic claimants to hard fought gains of emancipation. The popular prescriptions founded on indigeneity bolstered the hegemony of xenophobic discourse which reached its zenith during the pogrom of 2008. Although there has never been a repeat of a widespread physical torment of these migrants till recently in March/April 2015, there is a general disquiet among foreigners that the nativist exclusion is bordering on the compromise of the extension of basic humans rights. The majority of these migrants find their way into construction sector of the economy. In this climate of non-abating ethnical tensions, the research is investigating the treatment of foreign construction workers on site. Five case studies which were upwards of \$40 million each were used in Johannesburg where interviews were conducted with foreign workers, construction managers and few local workers as well, for perspective. It was found that job commitment, tenacity, determination and generally better conditions and pay, compared to home countries which have no credible alternatives results in increased loyalty to the employers. Although all the foreigners were regarded to be disciplined productive workforce, their perception of acceptance differed by their country of origin.

Keywords: recruitment, xenophobia, foreign workers, indigeneity.

## INTRODUCTION

South Africa has welcomed foreign workers for decades but the ushering of a new dispensation brought unprecedented numbers of foreigners into the land, who entered even the hitherto untouched sectors. The xenophobic sentiments that have developed over the years have affected most workplaces. Unlike other countries which are new to the idea of the globalization, South Africa's labour has always had an international mix. This study seeks to assess how the new negative sentiments towards these arrivals particularly those from beyond the immediate neighbouring countries are treated in the construction.

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The dismantling of Apartheid in 1994 not only ushered in a new dispensation which advocated democracy but opened the floodgates for an unprecedented migration of peoples from the rest of the continent and beyond, most of whom were economic migrants. The concept of the 'push' and 'pull' factors attracting people into South Africa should be understood within a context of specific countries and regions in the continent experiencing one conflict after another (Hussein 2003). The majority of these new arrivals do not have recognized qualifications and some of them are unqualified for highly technical sectors making certain sectors like mining, agriculture and construction the most easily accessible. This happens in a country with progressive migration laws to such an extent that you cannot deny anyone the claim and temporary status of an asylum-seeker, and this is due to a number of precedent setting rulings of the courts, as well as various clauses of the Refugee Act. According to the former Home Affairs minister Pandor (2014) this has led to a situation where economic migrants are abusing the Act in order to have status in South Africa. Unlike many jurisdictions, South Africa grants temporary asylum status to applicants and allows them to work with such a temporary status. The system is bedevilled by its own Act and the human rights jurisprudence prevents introducing changes that detract from the essential core of the human rights character as enshrined in the country's Bill of Rights (Pandor 2014).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A xenophobe is a person who is fearful or contemptuous of that which is foreign, especially strangers or people from different countries and cultures; a phenomenon that can tersely be defined as a deep antipathy to foreigners (OED 2015). When one follows the global literature on globalization, scholarly treatments of xenophobic violence in South Africa also tend to rely on theories of anomie and chaos. This is articulated by Nyamnjoh (2006) when he states *“the accelerated flows of capital, goods, electronic information and migration induced by globalization have exacerbated insecurities and anxieties, bringing about an obsession with citizenship and belonging and the re-actualization of boundaries through xenophobia.”* The basic crux of the arguments is that globalization automatically generates anomie and confusion and that xenophobic violence is a natural reaction to this flux. However, rapid migration, mixing, and culture contact is historically a feature of the sub-continent since the mid-1800s and sometimes in arguably the more extreme forms than today especially when one considers the mfecane, the apartheid era forced removals and other periods of massive intense dislocation (Landau 2010). These events and the recent ones in March/April 2015 have inspired a lot of soul-searching in South Africa as academics seek to explain why multi-culturism in the much-vaunted Rainbow Nation has become so elusive (Hickel 2014).

Many accounts of the pogroms around the world seem to focus on globalization as a primary driver. Two strands emanate from this argument, one holds that neoliberal policy and structural adjustment undermine livelihoods and spur violent competitions over the ever shrinking scarce resources of housing and jobs. A second strand is preoccupied with identity politics, and posits that the cultural *“flows”* that are characteristic of globalization induce a state of hybridity, flux and moral anomie that triggers the impulse to violently recreate social boundaries (Hickel 2014). In South Africa xenophobia phenomenon is a recent development contextually birthed by the geo-political developments post 1990. Not only did the proxy wars in Africa between the East and West come to an end around this period, but within South Africa itself the newly appointed leaders of the ANC were followed by the citizens of the countries

that gave them shelter during the tumultuous struggle years. These were also joined by peoples from other countries who traditionally had not had their citizens working in South Africa.

### **History of Labour Migration in South Africa**

South African has been a migrant-receiving country for decades, although traditionally the majority of those migrants were from neighbouring countries within the Southern African region. It is important to note that before 1994 the country was also an important destination for (white) immigrants from Europe, who were allowed to have dual citizenship with their countries of origin. Historically the labour migrants were largely concentrated in their largest numbers in the South African mining industry (Pederdy 1999). The precise mix of the source countries varied over time but Mozambique, Lesotho and (until the 1970s) Malawi were the major suppliers. Entry into the country was on a temporary basis on fixed contract and governed by bilateral treaties between South African and the supplier countries. Recruitment was centralized in a single industry-financed monopoly, The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA), which managed an extensive network of recruiting offices in supplier states. These migrants were transported home at the end of their contracts to renew; if they became diseased, severely injured or disabled they were sent home (Department of Labour 2007).

Concessions were granted to the commercial agricultural sector and until the 1960s there were arrangements to allow arrested irregular migrants to be employed by commercial farmers (Pederdy 1999). There were regional agreements dating back to the apartheid era but which spilled over into the current era, where the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Labour allow the recruitment of seasonal agricultural foreign migrant workers (SAMP 2000). Besides these two aforementioned sectors other employers were not permitted to hire foreign labour. However before 1963 there were no restrictions on the movements of migrants from Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Despite these arrangements irregular migrants were repatriated (Pederdy 1999). Irregular migration into South African thus has a long history, although it focused on commercial farming, and to a lesser extent domestic service and construction (Jonathan and Alan 1997). This has created a situation where in most households there is a family member working in South Africa.

South Africa has always had the strong pulling forces as an employment destination. However all black workers local and foreign, were subjected to extreme forms of exploitation under apartheid. Foreign workers were regularly deported or simply left because of apartheid restrictions which made migration very hard. Migration actually peaked in 1951 at just over 600,000 to 320,000 by 1985 (Department of Labour 2007).

### **The arrival of a new type of immigrant**

The international migration is divided into three main types; namely labour mobility, refugee movements and permanent migration (Kok, Gelderblom and van Zyl 2006). It has been noted by others that labour migrants although unskilled, often have considerable entrepreneurial drive towards self-betterment, some complement of skills and some resource in order to finance the trip or trips. Labour migration tends to be cumulative: 'remittances may lead to more migration because they show that migration works, they finance other family members' trips, and they show what the neighbors have to do to "keep up with the Joneses"' (Ellerman 2003:15-16). Remittances from migrants are so significant that they outweigh the international development aid flowing into developing countries.

Refugee movements as with work migrants are reluctant migrants who generally want to return home. When they do, it is often to a developing country, frequently one ravaged by conflict (Nicholson 2002). The last group is that of permanent migration, which is comprised of people who have higher skills as a result of the greater economic return to education in industrial countries. This last group comprise what is normally termed the brain drain (Kok, Gelderblom and zyl 2006).

The immigration statistics in South Africa are very unreliable even by the government's own admission. The highest movement appears to be internal migration since in the new dispensation people are now free to move around from province to province, a scenario that is new in this country. For instance between 2001 and 2007 Gauteng population grew naturally by 74% and only 26% was due to migration with cross-border migration accounting for only 3%. International or cross-border migration is far less numerical, although there are speculations of between 1-8 million. The known statistics are for recognized refugees, asylum seekers, persons with work permits and deportees, although these do not represent migration trends (FMSP 2010). Since the dismantling of apartheid opened a lot of sectors that were a preserve of the locals, the construction sector is one such sector that has been subjected to a deluge of foreign workers. Because of the dire situation they left in their home countries it has been argued that in the construction industry the foreign labourers are more committed and therefore more productive.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research is mixed method qualitative in that it sought to engage with people and solicited their sentiments about their sentiments towards foreign workers. But since a questionnaire was extensively used it is also quantitative and therefore a mixed method approach. According to Maxwell (2012) to design a qualitative study, one cannot just develop (or borrow) a logical strategy in advance and then implement it faithfully. Qualitative research design, to a much greater extent than quantitative research is an innovative rather than a standardized process, one that involves gleaning back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing their implications for one another. It does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components (Maxwell 2012). So a mixed method offers more than one type of investigative perspective, in that it offers the best of two worlds: the in-depth, contextualised and natural insights of qualitative study bolstered by the predictive power of a quantitative approach. Most pertinently the design must fit not only its use but also its environment. The methods deployed below were the ones it was felt would be the most appropriate for this type of research.

The central question in this study was 'Is the South African construction industry exclusively Hostile Towards Foreign Nationals?' Interviews were conducted with construction managers in five different sites, who are in charge of the work progress, and pertinently with the foreign workers and local workers (10 ~2/site) for perspective. This research is interested in the depth of the data and in appreciating its breath, to attain a proper understanding of the data the researcher has to play an active role in the data collection (Wimmer and Dominick 1997). It was therefore decided that interviewing the people and getting the experiences of the groups from working with each other will give depth and appreciable girth to the enquiry. Describing what an interview is, Frey and Oishi (1995) defined it as a "*purposeful conversation in which one person asks prepared questions (interviewer) and another answers them*

(respondent)” this is done to gain an in-depth information on a particular area to be researched. Open-ended interviews were opted for and they are defined by Nichols (1991) as “*an informal interview, not structured by a standard list of questions. Fieldworkers are free to deal with the topics of interest in any order and to phrase their questions as they think best.*” Open-ended questions allow the interviewer, if they wish, to probe deeper into the initial response of the respondent to gain a more detailed answer to the question (Wimmer and Dominick 1997). The richness of the data can thus be enhanced by this approach. This is very important in a situation where the contracts managers are involved in hiring foreign workers and deal with the problems that could be encountered on a daily basis. The domestic workers also provided insightful input when articulating their sentiments about foreign workers and themes emerged which are discussed below. This is critical as it help us in understanding social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, giving proper emphasis to the meanings, experiences and views of the participants (Mays and Pope 1995).

A questionnaire was used and 35 respondents were engaged in the five identified sites in Gauteng. The questionnaires were given to foreign workers who were willing to participate although some had reservation talking to people who were outsiders. The same questions were asked to the foreigners, who were seven per site and the intention was to get the widest possible spread of representativity. The questions are shown in figure 2 below. A questionnaire is defined as a formalized set of questions for obtaining information from respondents. The overriding objective is to translate the researcher’s information needs into a set of specific questions that respondents are willing and able to answer. A questionnaire is the main means of collecting quantitative primary data (Malhotra 2011). A questionnaire enables quantitative data to be collected in a standardized way so that the data are internally consistent and coherent for analysis. In all cases the role of the questionnaire is to provide a standardized interview across all subjects. This is so that when the questions are asked or presented, it is always in exactly the same way. To avoid a plethora of different responses that could be saying the same thing put in hundred different ways, questionnaires were thought to be the best tool to provide standard responses that could easily be analysed. The questions dealt with specific challenges foreigners could be facing on site from the information gathered from the media and anecdotal accounts.

The mixed method approach advocated for earlier on was opted for because it was thought both methods together enhance the perspectival clarity of the research problem intensely than either type by itself (Creswell, 2008). The multiple viewpoints accorded by this approach pits the subjectiveness (which provides depth) of qualitative data against the objectiveness (which provides girth) of quantitative approach. This is complementarily beneficial in assisting researchers in properly appreciating the nature and extent of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Interviews elicited common themes from the respondents and the thematic analysis was used to code these themes, after which they were grouped in order to glean any commonalities that might be meaningful. There are two stages to treating themes, the semantic and the latent level (Boytzis, 1998). The semantic looks at the surface meaning of what the data says and does not go beyond what the respondent has actually uttered, without theorizing about the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990). On the other hand the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify the underlying ideas, assumptions

and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. In this study the contextual political exigencies will not be ignored when latently interpreting the data. Thus for latent thematic analysis, the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work, and the analysis thus produced goes beyond the descriptive but it already encapsulates theorization. The overall research design is Convergent Parallel Design where quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis is done separately but the results of both the questionnaires and interviews are compared and related to offer a substantive interpretation. Not only does this approach offer corroboration from different methods but it proffers a more complete understanding from the two databases.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The research was taken before the current spate of xenophobic attacks in South Africa as of April/March 2015. We believe the results are not tainted by the heightened negative sentiments towards foreign workers. Interviews were held with the contracts managers in 5 sites and also with local workers for perspective and questionnaires were handed to willing foreign workers. In interviewing the contracts managers and local labourers certain themes emerged as shown in figure 1 below. It was clear that there is no official stance in all the companies to preclude foreigners from employment although managers were in agreement with their employees that there is proclivity to commitment by the foreigners vis-à-vis their local colleagues. A situation which is bolstered by literature when one looks at the dire situations they left in their home countries. The general exclusive sentiments which were tantamount to making the industry a preserve of the locals were voiced more by the locals with managers not demonstrating any stance on this issue. However xenophobic acts were observed even by some contracts managers and their staff in the form of intimidation, name-calling, general disrespect and bullying. This has been observed in the society at large and it is an observed phenomenon especially during periods of heightened ethnic tensions. What was surprising was the general regard of BOLESWA citizens as not technically foreign, a fact which could be attributed to ethnic similarities, historical ties, physiognomic similitudes and their long history of working in South Africa.

The questionnaire yielded the results shown below in figures 2 and 3. The main intention was to assess the treatment of foreign workers by their local peers and by the employer. For the most part it appears that there is some intimidation meted against foreign workers by their local peers. In conducting interviews with them it appears it normally comes from them performing the tasks assigned to them quicker and therefore being used as a benchmark by the employers as how an efficient worker should perform. The intimidation was bad in a few cases that the foreign workers had to change sections or had to resign and find some other work. Apparently there were no major differences in the responses from different sites.

However the discrimination that manifests itself in name calling and the general disrespect is almost non-existent when it comes to employees from BOLESWA (Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland) countries. The only reason one could find is that ethnically these peoples are related to South Africa and the languages of Sotho (Lesotho), Tswana (Botswana) and Swati (Swaziland) are all spoken in South Africa as one of the nine official languages. Physiognomically these people are not any different from the South Africans and they don't really seem as foreign as the people from other countries. These appear to be the most predominant plausible explanation because the Mozambicans have been working in the country for a long time but they

have never really been accepted. If the construction industry was a new territory for foreigners then the animosity should have been meted against everyone equally. Figures 2 depicts the experiences of foreign workers in different sites. Figure 3 particularly shows the nuances with regards to intimidation that is meted by fellow workers to their peers differentiated by the foreign workers country of origin.

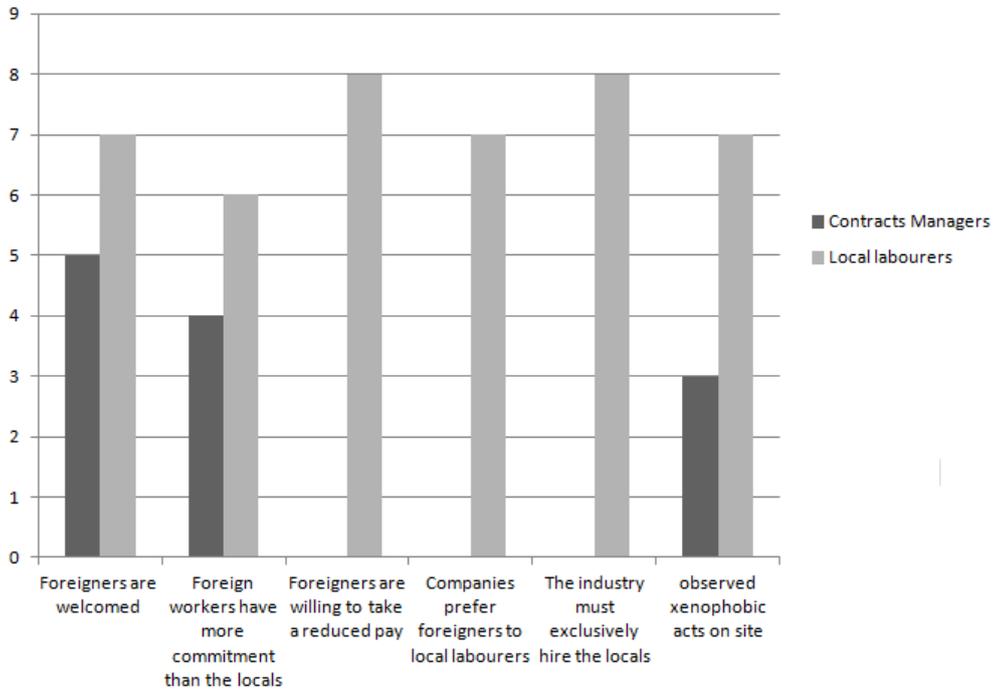


Figure 1: Themes on xenophobia from the interviews

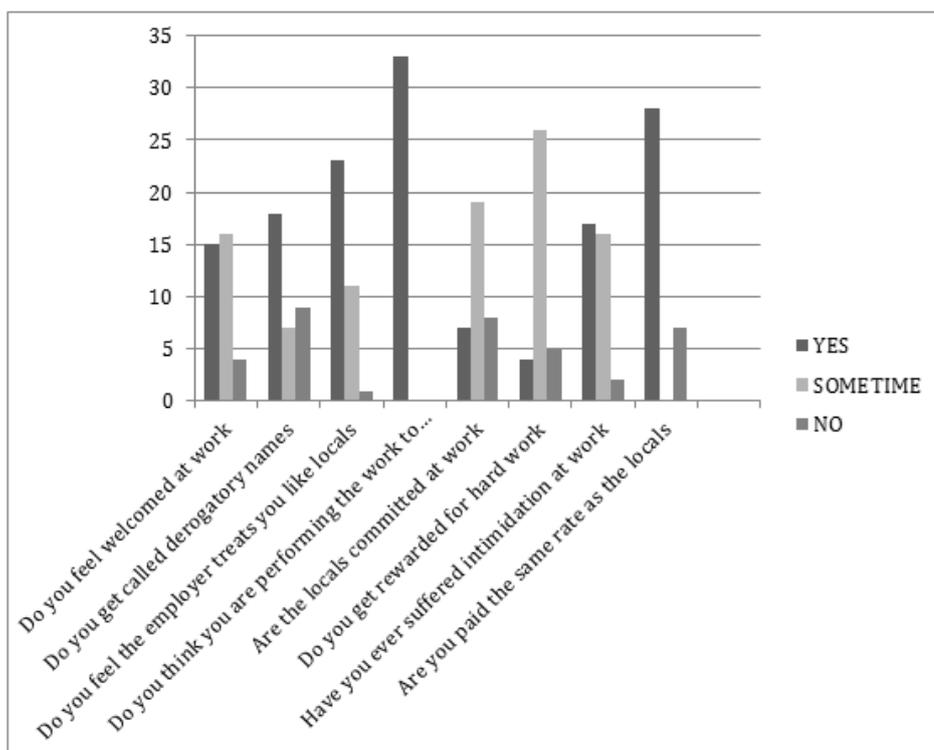


Figure 2: The experiences of foreign workers on site

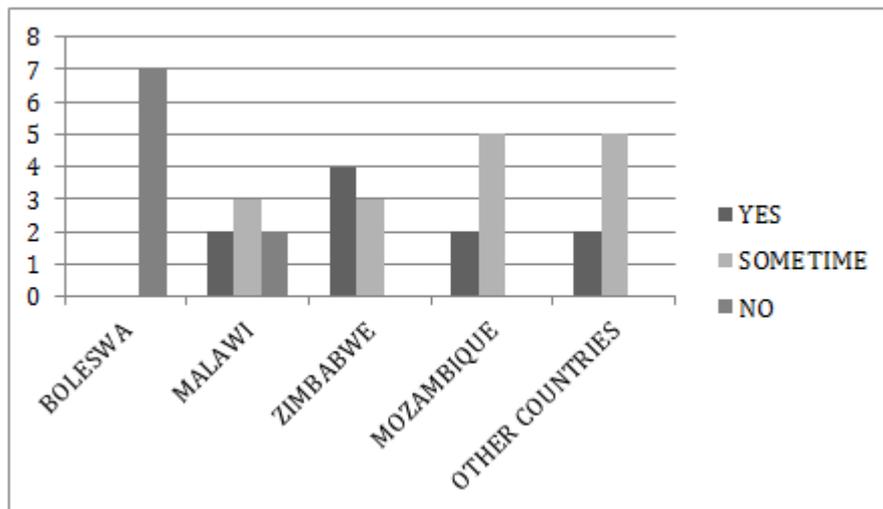


Figure 3: The intimidation experienced by sampled foreign workers on site

The findings from the interviews and the results from the questionnaires appear to offer some corroboration and the findings will be discussed below.

## FINDINGS

The construction industry in South Africa fully opened to the foreign workers legally as the same time as the country was opening to the entire world. The only industries that have a history of accepting foreign workers is the mining, agriculture and to a limited extent the domestic services sector. The influx of unskilled migrants found an easy access to the construction sector. Their commitment was embraced and accepted by employers. The local workers generally believe the foreign workers invite their compatriots to the exclusion of the locals once they are in a position of authority to do so. This fuels the accusation of job snitching by foreigners. There were also accusations of accepting lower wages although this could not be proved on the sites visited. Although there is no proof of overwhelming preference to the exclusion of the locals, the preference was perceived as dislodgement from sectors traditionally regarded as a preserve for the unskilled local labourers. This perception and the demonstrable aptitude for productive task execution, has fuelled animosity on the construction sites to such an extent that the intimidation has in some occasions led to foreign workers changing jobs in extreme cases. Foreigners however many they are on a site, as long as they are from BOLESWA countries which have a strong ethnic relation to the South Africans they are treated like locals without any abuse and prejudice. Hence the xenophobia on sites is ethnically nuanced. This happens despite the fact that peoples from most SADC countries in general, have worked in South African mines for over a century.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although South Africa has been welcoming foreign workers for decades this was only concentrated on a few sectors namely, mining, agriculture and domestic service. The arrival of new migrants post-1994 who have come to the land to seek better livelihoods have created a new significant foreign element in the workforce. Although there are many foreigners in South Africa, prejudice was found to be rife and nuanced and the following conclusions were made:

7. Foreigner workers treatment is ethnically nuanced. BOLESWA foreign workers who are ethnically similar to indigenous South Africans are treated like the locals by their peers.
8. The otherness of the foreign workers is predominant at the coalface but there is no systematic official sanctioned ill-treatment by companies.
9. The general negative sentiments toward foreign workers, which are manifested in prejudice and intimidation are not officially sanctioned but are rife at the grassroots level.
10. The dire politically conditions in the home countries of foreign workers result in workers who value their work and demonstrate a comparatively better commitment which has endeared them to their employers.
11. Because of the official stance of the companies which is not exclusive, the xenophobic tendencies of the staff does impact the new foreigners seeking to join the industry, and the foreign talent is not lost.

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